9 Blogging as a tool for intercultural learning in a telecollaborative study

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Abstract

This paper is based on an analysis of blog writings from an English-Korean telecollaborative project. This research found that rich intercultural interactions occur between Korean learners and English learners. Through a discursive analysis of the blog writings in which participants compared Korean and American cultures, this paper elucidates participants' intercultural learning in a process of conversing with target language speakers online.

Keywords: blogging, intercultural learning, qualitative approach.

1. Introduction

Many telecollaborative studies have explored language learners' intercultural learning (Belz, 2003; O'Dowd, 2003), but it is rather unclear how to identify and assess it (Helm, 2009). In order to provide detailed accounts of intercultural learning, many studies have used qualitative approaches based on the analysis of participants' writing (Menard-Warwick, 2009). For example, Helm's (2009) telecollaborative study showed that diaries could be used as a valuable resource for identifying intercultural understanding. For the current study, blog writing is used to analyze participants' intercultural learning. Blogs, especially shared blogs, are acknowledged as a space for developing critical ideas based on its sharedness and openness (Bloch, 2007). While posting new entries and commenting on other

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posts, participants exchange, share their ideas, and can develop their cultural knowledge. The current study aims to provide a deeper qualitative description of intercultural learning in a telecollaborative project. The study addresses the following research question: what evidence of intercultural attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical awareness (Byram, 1997) can be identified in the blog writings?

2.   Methodology

The current telecollaborative study was conducted in an out-of-school context with two adult language learning groups (aged 21 to 45). Based on the participants' interests and self-rated target language proficiency, a total of eight pairs of Korean speakers learning English (who are referred to as ELL) and English speakers learning Korean (who are referred to as KLL) were formed by the researcher. For 11 weeks, the participants engaged in personal and group blog writings while exchanging their cultural and linguistic knowledge. The researcher posted a new topic every week in the group blog. The participants wrote their ideas and experiences about the topics in their personal blog in an L2, which were commented on by their partner in his/her L1. In order for participants to discuss the topics with multiple people, the participants were also invited to discuss their ideas in the group blog. The participants posted a new entry or left comments on other participants' posts in either L1 or L2. The participants' Korean writings were translated into English by the researcher. Drawing on inductive qualitative data analysis, all the data was transcribed, organized, and then coded (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this process, Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model was adopted for identification of intercultural learning.

3.   Result

In this section, the analysis of five blog excerpts that illustrate Byram's (1997) ICC model will be presented. These samples are not the only evidence of

intercultural understanding in participants' writings. These examples were chosen because they clearly show the five components.

3.1. Attitudes

Attitudes refer to individuals' openness and readiness to change their previous belief about their own and other cultures (Byram, 1997). When the participants had the discussion on eating dog meat in Korea, Sara (KLL) seemed to be unsettled and uncomfortable with the idea of eating dog meat at first. However, as she discussed with other participants, she revisited this issue and changed her opinion:

> "China eats monkey brains… Cambodia eats fried tarantulas… Mexico eats ant larvae… we can't call things barbaric just because we haven't tried them" (4/27/2015, group blog).

As seen in the above writing, she defended other food cultures which people may consider to be "barbaric". After considering other nations' food cultures, she seemed to accept the Korean food culture of eating dog meat.

3.2. Knowledge

Knowledge refers to information about social groups and practices (Byram, 1997). Amanda's (KLL) knowledge of Korean culture seemed to be generated from her experience in Korea and seemed later to be converted into her own knowledge through communication with other participants. In her previous communication with her partner, Amanda raised questions about Koreans' respect for elders and her partner confirmed that there is a high social expectation for Koreans. Based on this conversation, she then used a blog as a space for developing and sharing her ideas of Korean culture:

> "Americans don't really have the same mentality for elder people. In Korea I see people give up their seat for older people. It doesn't happen that often here in the States" (4/28/2015, personal blog).

This statement includes not only her observation about Korean culture but also her awareness of American culture. By posting her idea, Amanda displays her knowledge about both cultures and attempts to share with others.

3.3.   Skills of interpreting and relating

Skills of interpreting and relating refer to an ability to interpret other cultures and to relate it to individual's own culture (Byram, 1997). Haeun (ELL) wrote the difference between Korean and American cultures regarding discrimination.

> "Koreans discriminate more against foreigners [compared to Americans], I think. I feel Americans are more used to having foreigners around since people from different countries immigrated to the U.S. and have lived together for a long time" (6/5/2015, personal blog, translated).

The use of "more" indicates that Haeun compared Korean culture to American culture. More importantly, her reflection of Koreans' discrimination moved beyond a superficial idea. She attempted to interpret the reasons behind Koreans' discrimination by referencing her knowledge of American history. The comparison of two cultures seemed to enrich her understanding of both cultures.

3.4.   Skills of discovery and interaction

Skills of discovery and interaction refer to the ability to acquire new knowledge (Byram, 1997). In the fourth week, participants discussed the popularity of Korean pop culture and its impact on the economic and political status of Korea in the world. Many participants expressed that Hallyu (i.e. the Korean Wave[2]) is widespread and its impact is significant. David (KLL) showed his interest in Hallyu after communicating with other participants:

2. The Korean Wave refers to the increasing popularity of Korean popular culture around the world.

> "I wonder if people do like Korean things because it is truly high quality or because people are hooked on this tidal wave effect. Perhaps one day the Hallyu wave will be gone and I wonder if it will shift to a different country" (5/9/2015, group blog).

David's statement "I wonder if it will shift…" implies that he did not just assume a value for the target culture but rather he approached it critically, indicating that his interest may turn into further exploration. *Skills of discovery and interaction*, thus, seem to originate from interest in a culture which is inspired by others' ideas and drives learners to explore.

3.5.   Critical cultural awareness

Critical cultural awareness refers to an ability to evaluate an individual's own culture and the target culture (Byram, 1997). Haeun (ELL) displayed her opinion regarding Koreans' aspiration for English learning:

> "I agree that [Korean people] spend a lot of money and time in English learning. In fact, I think there may not be many situations where people have to use English in their social lives except for tasks within a particular company" (5/30/2015, personal blog, translated).

Haeun, who before argued that learning English is necessary for everyone, adjusted her opinion after her partner posted her opinion about Koreans' abnormal enthusiasm for English learning. Haeun agreed with her partner's idea and her statement "there may not be many situations" indicates her awareness of the problem. Haeun seemed to develop her cultural awareness through communicating with her partner.

4.   Discussion and conclusion

Based on Byram's (1997) ICC model, the current research explores intercultural learning in a telecollaborative project.

First, *attitudes* comprise not only positive or negative feelings but curiosity and willingness to change misconceptions (Byram, 1997). In this sense, *attitudes* include a more active agency, which is seen in Sara's case. She changed her attitudes regarding Koreans eating dog meat. Second, *knowledge* seems to be socially constructed in that it is based on previous experience, but it can change or evolve through interaction with others. Amanda's understanding of Korean culture about respect for the elderly was derived from her observation in Korea, but was confirmed through interaction with her partner. Third and fourth, *skills of interpreting and discovery* may be more advanced levels of intercultural learning since they seem to involve participants' active exploration of finding out the reasons or background beyond stereotypical ideas. As Haeun and David showed, they did not just accept surface level knowledge. Rather, they attempted to interpret or seek deeper understanding. Fifth, *critical cultural awareness* seems to be derived from interactions with others, which is evidenced in participants' writings. For example, many writing examples started with a phrase of reflection on another person's post as seen in Haeun's writing "I agree that…" This implies that Haeun built on another's idea. In fact, communications with different people allowed participants to construct new viewpoints which may further develop as a critical awareness.

The results of the current study corroborate the findings of previous research that in using blogs, participants can share their intercultural ideas and participants' writing samples are important evidence to show their intercultural learning (Helm, 2009).

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Edited by Sake Jager, Malgorzata Kurek, and Breffni O'Rourke